

# Foul play suspected in Black soldier's death

By Daniel R. Brown  
Special to Sentinel-Voice  
ST. LOUIS (NNPA) — "The military came to my door on July 19 at 7:30 in the morning. The moment my wife looked out the window and she said 'John, it's a soldier standing on the porch,' I knew it was bad news," recounted John Johnson, father of Private LaVena Johnson, 19, of Florissant, Mo., who died recently near Balad, Iraq.

She was the first female soldier from Missouri to die while serving in the current war in Iraq.

"It came totally unexpected, because she had just talked to her mother on the phone on Sunday for about an hour," Johnson said.

"They talked just about everything: about how crazy things were, the weather, the big spiders and the large scorpions. They just laughed and

had a good time — the way they always do."

Despite the personal visit that LaVena's family received, which is standard military protocol for families of soldiers who die in the line of duty, they have many unanswered questions concerning her death, which is under investigation.

"This is what they said: 'Your daughter died this morning of a self-inflicted wound,'" Johnson recounted.

"I said, 'Self-inflicted? Are you saying that my daughter shot herself?' He said, 'No, sir, but it's being investigated.'"

After LaVena's remains were returned to the family two weeks ago, the Johnsons did some disturbing and shattering investigations of their own.

"I am going to tell you for a fact. We looked at her body and we saw some things,"

Johnson said.

"I don't want to say too much right now, but I am going to say this: I think that the investigation is a criminal investigation, and I think that there is foul play."

At Hazelwood Central High School, from which she graduated in 2004, LaVena was known as a topnotch student.

Despite her school's large size, she stood out for her exceptional academic and extra-curricular performances. That's why it was a shock to many when, during her junior year, she announced her plans to join the U.S. Army following her graduation.

"It's like a conversation that I had yesterday. She said that she was going in the Army, and I was shocked because I just knew that she was going to go on to school," said Frank Smith, Central's principal.

"I knew her three brothers, because her three brothers graduated from Central, and I know that they went on to college and different things. I was wondering why she wouldn't pursue that."

Her father, who served in the military for three years, provided some insight into how she reached her decision.

"She talked to me about the benefits of me going, because I went from high school to the Army. When I got ready to go to college, it did pay for some of it. When I got my first house, I didn't have to make a down payment because I was a veteran," Johnson said.

"So, she decided it would be a good idea for her to go into the military first, because she wanted to travel and she wanted to earn her own money to go to college. We told her that we could

come up with the money to send her to school, but she said, 'No, I want to do this on my own.'"

Based on her performance on a military aptitude test, LaVena was initially assigned to work as a chaplain's assistant.

But, once the Army discovered that she did not have a driver's license, she was reassigned to weapons supply.

"The chaplain's assistant position would have been great, because she is a good Christian woman," Johnson said. "That would have been perfect."

A member of the 129th Corps Support Battalion based at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, LaVena arrived in Iraq in April 2005, just four months ago. The Johnsons, a close family of seven, remained in regular contact with LaVena while she was

there. "She talked on the phone to my wife just about every day. She e-mailed her sister, and they communicated on the computer often. And then, in between the two of them, I wrote her," Johnson said.

LaVena will be remembered by all who knew her for her big smile and her even bigger heart.

"The point that really stands out is that, out of 2,700 kids at the school, when she walked up, she had a smile on her face," Smith, her former principal, said.

"She was that type of child that made an impact on everyone that she came in close contact with. She was just a great child. We all were at a loss for words when we got the word that she had passed away in Iraq."

Daniel R. Brown writes for the St. Louis American.

## NAN

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ris and Tarkanian, 15 other women received awards: Bessie Richards, Tiffany Elliot, Helicia Thomas, Lillian McMorris, Kye Wilson, Marsha Coles, Jackie Ingram, Renee Wilson, Evelyn Washington, Dina Titus, Rose Winston, Sandra Phillip Johnson, Ju Juan Morris, Margie Rosada and Barbara Robinson.

NAN is a political, human and civil rights organization

guest speaker:

"I think that we're still fighting racial discrimination, disparities in life for Black and Whites in areas of health, home ownership, education and economic development. We have to start mobilizing again, using boycotts, mass marches, to fight against this hatred by the Republican Party like we used to do in the past. We should have never stopped protesting and fighting for

beneficial and fought for by Blacks over the past decades."

Harris informed the audience about a major project, empowering women, undertaken by NAN at the national level: the Truth-Hamer Initiative on Voter Registration and Education. The initiative has spent the past three years empowering people, especially women, in communities across the nation through voter registration and education programs focused on areas overlooked by get-out-the-vote campaigns.

Harris explained and provided handouts on the lead issues: (1) reminding voters that they have the right to view a sample ballot before voting, (2) telling voters that they have the right to receive special assistance with voting if they cannot read, are disabled or require assistance with operating the voting machine, (3) indicating to voters that if they make a mistake or "spoil" their ballot, they have the right to receive a replacement ballot, (4) voters have the right to take their voter bill of rights into the polling booth with them, (5) voters have the right to vote free from intimidation or coercion, (6) voters have the right to bring their minor children into the polling booth with them, (7) voters have the right to cast their ballot if they are in line at the time the polling site closes, and (8) voters have the right to file a grievance with the Office of the Secre-

tary of State if voting rights have been violated.

Gene Collins, founder of the Las Vegas chapter and state chairman of NAN, spoke about the work of the local chapter and the success of the event.

He said, "The things that we do not only affect those [in the nearby neighborhoods] in Las Vegas, but all across this valley by addressing the issues of diversity, little league baseball, Pop Warner football or doing something about the gang problems in our community. What you see here tonight is a cross-section of the work that we are doing and recognizing those who have made a difference."

Collins continued, "Through our efforts, more Blacks now serve on corporate boards since we addressed this issue of diver-



Sentinel-Voice photo by Les Pierres Sireater

The Rev. Al Sharpton, founder of the National Action Network, urged Blacks to advocate for change in Las Vegas.

sity. Now we see more African American subcontractors along with people holding seats in the glassed filled ivory towers due to the efforts of the National Action Network."

After the event, Collins noted that it was wonderful having Sharpton as speaker,

but he was "most pleased with the number of local people who attended — more than 200 came," he said.

The organization is seeking nominations from the community to recognize women for the 2006 awards event. For more information, call 646-9720.

*"We're committed to economic and social justice, and we understand the importance of bringing women into the political process."*

— Marjorie Field Harris  
NAN Executive Director



focused on action in accordance with the vision of Reverend Al Sharpton.

He and a group of political and civil rights activists in 1991 wanted to empower people by providing extensive voter education, services to aid the poor and support for economically disadvantaged small community businesses.

In addition, the group wanted a vehicle through which they could confront racism and violations of civil and human rights.

NAN National President Sharpton commented on the State of Black America as

our rights," Sharpton said.

He continued, "The nomination of Roberts for the Supreme Court Justice is tantamount to a continuation of the fight for civil rights by Blacks. He was a part of the Reagan and Bush senior administration fighting against affirmative action, and that's not a good sign for us. We need to put more pressure on the Democrats in the Senate to fight against his nomination. If he's elected at 50-years-old, he could serve on the Supreme Court for the next 30 or 40 years, and that could turn back the clock on a lot of things that have been

with the Office of the Secre-

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